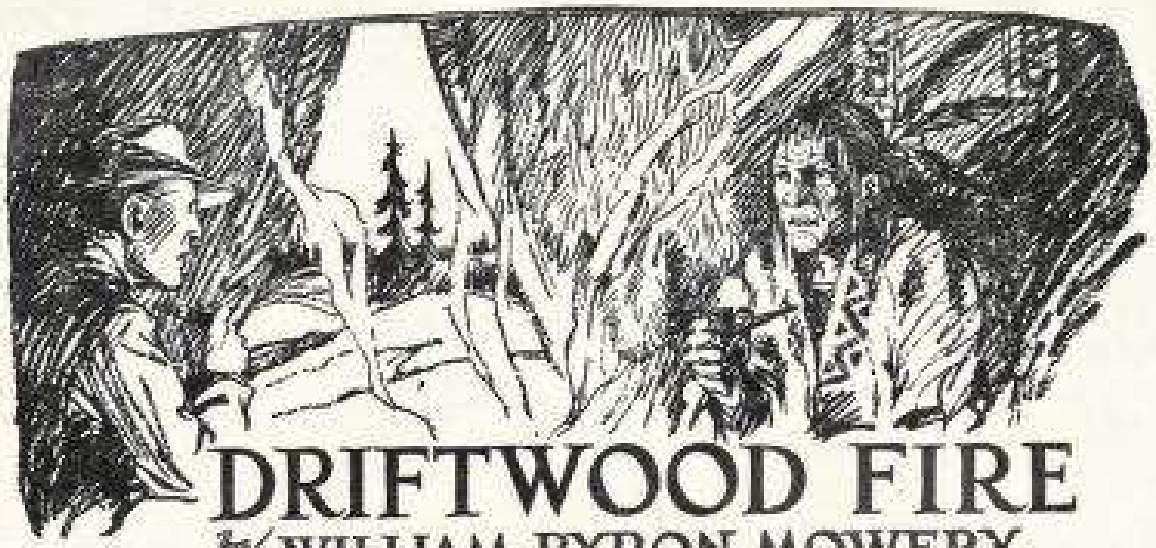

DRIFTWOOD FIRE

by WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

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THE Spring snow was slushy and our dog-teams heavy-footed from a long day; but Oponi the Yellow Knife guide had said that the chinook coming down the valley smelled of smoke—lodge smoke. There were several reasons why I wanted to find the Indian camp if one was near us. Primitive I knew they would be, in the head-water hills of that Arctic river; but our food was low, and we needed dogs to replace those which had run away into the woods. So in spite of good-humored growling from the two Mackenzie Crees, we treked on down the river spruce-belt through April evening gloom.

Oponi's bottle-nose was as good as a dog's. We had gone two miles and it was deep dark before we caught glimpses of lodge-fires ahead of us. The camp was a big one, we saw as we came near; at least two dozen teepees and many times that number of people. They received us courteously as we strode into the circle of light—a circumstance which put my Indians at better ease, for the coast tribes were in bad repute.

They were Hares, I saw at a glance; but that particular tribe had never been catalogued and pigeon-holed by any hand-book I had ever seen. They spoke a Tinneh dialect which we understood easily enough. The teams were quickly unhitched and fed, my men taken to lodges, and our outfits secured against their dogs. I was led to the teepee of the chief.

He rose to his feet, a tall, lean individual, as we entered. His face was in shadow then. While the one who had brought me explained our coming in brief and respectful language, I glanced about the teepee, noting its neatness and wilderness luxury—its fur rugs, carved weapons and feather robes. At a sign my guide left us alone. The chief waved me to sit. We faced each other over the fire.

My host was painted. Ocher and specular iron hid all his features except his eyes; and they were a dull, warm brown. I found myself staring straight into them. A silent minute passed. I tried to look away but it was flatly impossible. They held me in a strange spell. A quiver jigged up and down my backbone. I tried to analyze the cause, to discover what it was in those eyes which stirred me to my shoe-laces. It wasn't fear on my part; it wasn't mesmeric influence on his, for they were ordinary warm, brown eyes. I laid it to my tired nerves and waited for him to speak.

"You will eat and sleep in my lodge, stranger," he said at length in the dialect. "You have come far and are weary."

His words and his utterance had a friendliness to match his eyes. At least I would have sworn it so. Yet it seemed to me that outwardly he tried to appear cold and aloof.

While my food was being brought—a smoking joint of fresh caribou, marsh-fern bulbs and tart berry-mash—I spoke to him about the packing-dogs we needed and

supplies that would take us across the mountains and back to the Fort. He agreed without question of price. The only sign of life I got from him was a flicker of delight when he lighted up my present of *stemmo*.

All the while I ate and talked, the back part of my brain was turning over the problem of this chief's eyes. Twice I got hold of myself, dubbed it the effect of tired nerves, and put the problem out of mind. And twice it crept back, persistent.

This isn't a mystery story, so I will lay down my cards now and let you help play the hand. Maybe you can win where I couldn't.

It came to me forcefully that his eyes fascinated me because I had looked into them before. His features were hidden by paint, and his hair was long to the point of shagginess. I had only his eyes to judge by, and they were ordinary warm, brown eyes. Instead of trying to force my memory, I let it run back over the years where it listed; and it took me to the deck of a whaler, twenty-odd years ago, at the mouth of Kunayuk River south of Victoria Land. I was slipping a revolver and carton of cartridges into a man's pocket, and wishing him Godspeed—in a whisper—as he went over the side.

"Jim—" I leaned toward the fire and spoke in English—"Jim Stevenson, don't sit there and look at me that way —— you!"

The chief across the fire started slightly, but no more than any one would have done at the unexpected sound of another language. I couldn't believe that any man could play a part like that without betraying himself. I had hit straight at him without sign or warning.

"Your words are strange," he said at length. "Will you speak them in my tongue?"

Right then I believed I had made a mistake. Stevenson was dead—I knew that; dead twenty years and more. Even if he were alive, it was impossible to imagine him looking like this painted and feathered head-man of a primitive Hare tribe. Yet, what put the idea into my head? Tired nerves? Maybe.

"My words meant nothing," I said coldly.

"But they were spoken for my ear," the chief objected, and waited for an answer.

"I thought you were a man that you are not," I explained lamely.

"How is that? Were not your words the words that one white man speaks to another?"

"They were. This other was a white man."

"How is that? How can a white man so resemble me? I have seen them, many of them, many years since, when the great canoes followed the whales in the coast waters. Yet never have I seen one that wore my clothes or spoke my language."

"If you have seen the ships that chased the whales, you will follow my words with understanding. When that warrior—" I pointed through the tent-flap to a young buck of twenty-three—"when he was a papoose I was chasing whales on one of those great canoes. There was a head-man who gave commands to all of us. His name was Jodrell. There were three smaller chiefs, and I was one of them. There were five and thirty men. One of them was the man who—who made me address you with white words."

The chief nodded interestedly. He refilled his pipe and puffed expectantly. The way he took to that *stemmo*——

"This man Stevenson was tall, as you are tall; and slender, as you are slender. Before he came with us on the ship he had been a wanderer among the many tribes of white men. He followed no single work, as other men do. He was like a leaf drifting with the current. Wherefore he was called the Drifter.

"He was brought on the ship, out of a white man's city, when he did not know his right hand from his left. Head-man Jodrell had need of another man to work. He had a temper like a surly Spring silver-tip; so that his men deserted him just when the ship was ready to come up into these waters. So few were his men that his daughter went with us to see that we were fed as men who work hard should be.

"But man Stevenson would not work. He would not lend a hand to the ropes and white wings that carried the ship along. He would not wash the floor of the ship with water and a stone. When the smaller canoes were lifted down upon the waves and dashed away after a whale, he would not lean against his paddle. When a whale carcass was tied to the ship, he would not help cut out the bone with which you foot your *komatiks*.

"He said he had been brought on the ship against his will because a man had put

powder in his conversation water; but against his will he would not work. He was whipped across his bare back with thongs. For a week he went without food. For another week he was tied to a stump in the center of the ship. But he kept his word and did no work. His mind was as hard even as the mind of head-man Jodrell.

"After we were many days on the water, the head-man's arm grew tired of lashing man Stevenson and his tongue grew tired of calling him evil names and spitting upon him. The five and thirty men and the two smaller chiefs were at one mind with head-man Jodrell; they hated the one who would do no work. They thought man Stevenson was lazy. They did not understand why a man would not lend his hand to work when that was easier than receiving a lashing or going without food or being tied to a stump. They did not understand that his honor kept him from working. Not one of them spoke to him in kindness. He grew to hate them all.

"In the middle of the Moon of the Leaf, four men and a smaller chief went in a little boat to the mouth of Kok-Kanayuk to shoot birds for food, while the ship stood out in deep water. In those days your people, chief, and other tribes that came down to the coast were bitter against the white men, and slew such as fell into their hands."

"Because they robbed us in trade and profaned our women and gave drink to our young men," the chief said coolly.

"But since the ships that chase the whale no longer come into these coast waters we are at peace with white men and treat them kindly, as we have treated you, stranger."

"I gave no blame on either side," I said hastily. "I but said the coast tribes were bitter against the ship men. When this smaller chief and his four men were hunting along the beach, a band of warriors hid in the boulders and mocked the cries of wild birds. The white men ran up close and the warriors tossed spears through them. We on the ship were watching through a tube which makes things far off seem as near to hand.

"Thus thirty men were left to do the work of five and thirty. Again the head-man's anger flamed against man Stevenson. He was lashed with thong's and bound day and night to the stump and kept without food till he could not stand. He would have died if some one had not brought him food in the dark of night. But I did not know this until later.

"The anger of head-man Jodrell grew hotter each day. All during the Moon of the Leaf we had chased the whales up and down the narrow waters from Kok-Kanayuk to Kok-Ernivilik; but very few were the ones we caught. When the Moon of hardened Caribou Horns came, we had taken scarcely the price of the food we had eaten. It seemed as if a medicine was working against the ship. And the head-man vented his anger upon man Stevenson.

"Many times in the night, when no one was around to see, I would talk with man Stevenson. At first I tried to sway him from his purpose not to work, but he would not listen to my words. Later, when he was lashed, I asked to do it myself in order that I might lighten——"

There was a flash of fire in the eyes of the chief. It was no such sign as my story should call for. Again I could not hold myself.

"—— you, Jim Stevenson!" I broke off. "Can you sit there and listen to the account of your degradation without batting an eye? You can paint and feather yourself up and be chief of all the Hares that ever hopped, but I'd know you for all the twenty-four years since I laid the last lash on your welted back!"

In the eyes across the fire there was mild bewilderment and reproach. Never a sign of understanding or of surprize.

"Your words are strange," the chief said slowly. "How can I understand the tale you are telling?"

Whereat I called myself names for being twice fooled by tired nerves; got fresh hold of myself; and went on.

"But even the head-man's anger would have worn itself thin and man Stevenson would have been taken back to the white man's city if Jodrell had not discovered who was bringing food to the whipped man at night. A smaller chief with the tongue of a raven first saw the girl. He told her father. Head-man Jodrell watched. He discovered that she loved the man who had stood out against the whole ship for his honor's sake. He struck her—I saw him—when she said she would marry man Stevenson if ever they reached the city again. He told her, with an oath and a loud laugh, that man Stevenson would never return alive.

"The ship at that time was within sight of land at the point where Kok-Kanayuk meets the sea. It was there, on a peak, that the Coast tribe slew the smaller chief and his four men. Head-man Jodrell said to those about him: 'Fire a gun that the hill warriors may know we are near and will be watching for a boat to come ashore to them.' "

"According to his order a gun was fired. Though I watched through the tube I could see none of the warriors. Yet we knew they were hunting and fishing near the river's mouth. None of us guessed the purpose of head-man Jodrell until he commanded us to lower a small boat—which had been battered by the head of a white whale—down upon the water; and to throw into it man Stevenson without food or weapon.

"I unlashed him from the stump where he was tied. No one came near to hear me whisper to him: 'There is a salmon sheen in the sky which means a storm is coming quickly. Therefore pull a strong oar to gain the land before the storm breaks. Go warily on the shore if you would escape the coast tribes. Here is a weapon. I slip it into your pocket, with cartridges. God speed, and may I see you face to face again, Jim Stevenson!' "

I PAUSED. I thought that surely the man never lived who could keep from betraying himself when I repeated those words after twenty-four years. That somber evening, the hard faces of the wharf wolves on the whaler, the scudding clouds whipping out of a salmon sky, the curl and kiss of white-caps, the whine of sea-gulls over the rigging, and the penciled outline of a bleak, gray coast were memories unforgettable. I heard yet the promise which Theresa Jodrell flung at Stevenson as he was handled into the boat. I saw yet his gesture to her of final parting, as if he knew he was going to certain death. Then there was fast work to do on deck, for night and a storm were close at hand——

I was brought out of the reverie by a word from the chief, bidding me go on. He was leaning forward now, listening with deepest interest.

"The ship was in water too shallow for our safety," I took up the narrative again. "There was a harbor in the river's mouth, but head-man Jodrell with a loud oath swore we would get back into deep water and start for the white man's city on the morrow. Though all the men wanted him to guide the ship into the harbor, his word was law and they did as he ordered them.

"But the ship would not sail into the teeth of the storm. Its white wings were torn off. The big tree in the ship's middle broke in two and had to be chopped away with axes. We could not gain safety in deep water. Instead we labored back and forth along the shallow coast, getting closer and closer to green reefs that would tear the ship to pieces as a wolf would tear a marmot. Even the head-man lost his anger and was afraid, for darkness had fallen and where the harbor was no man of us knew.

"One by one the men ceased their useless work and flung the head-man's curses back into his teeth. It was such a storm as none of us ever before had seen. There were cries in the darkness that this storm was the Manitou's anger against us for sending man Stevenson to his death. And those who in the days gone had bullied him most and spoken loudest against him, now cried the loudest against this Jodrell for bringing a curse upon us all. For we were lost, without chance of surviving the storm in those wind-frenzied waters; and not one of us but knew it.

"It was the daughter of the head-man who first saw a tiny gleam shoreward. I was sitting with her behind a canoe, out of the whip of the wind, trying to comfort her with the lie that man Stevenson could escape the coast tribes, cross the mountains and go down a river to a white trader's post. But she would not listen. She kept looking out into the darkness, which was like a solid wall, in the direction where he had gone. And so it was she who saw the gleam.

" 'It is he!' she cried. 'He has gained the headland and built a fire!' "

"Even as I looked where she pointed, the gleam leapt higher. It was such a fire as an Indian never would build, so I knew it must be the fire of man Stevenson. Moreover, the coast was everywhere so low, save at the high headland, that nowhere else could a fire be seen out on the water.

"I ran quickly to head-man Jodrell. 'We can steer the ship into the river harbor with that light to guide us!' I cried. After he looked at it once and again, he started shouting orders to the men. They dragged

up the heavy iron which was struggling to hold the ship in place; and straight as a feathered barb we darted through the darkness into the river harbor. There, with the iron on deep bottom, with the storm wind broken by the headland, and with the swift river-current butting against the shore-driven waves, we were safe through the night, till a gray dawn broke and the storm died to a whisper.

"That morning two boats full of armed men went ashore and I led them. We found the sodden ashes of a driftwood fire. It had been built on the wind-whipped peak of the headland, though all around were shelters of boulder rock and caves in low ledges. When the men looked at the fire, they saw and understood what the head-man's daughter and I had understood long hours since—that man Stevenson before darkness fell had seen our ship in the storm's grasp, and had kindled the fire to guide us into harbor.

"He must have known, too, that his fire would surely bring the coast tribe to him. In the wet sand were moccasin prints of many warriors who had crept upon him during the night. There was no blood or signs of struggle. Clearly they had not killed him there, but had taken him away, perhaps that all their village might enjoy his death. His shoe-tracks leading back into the savage country were the last signs I have seen of Jim Stevenson—until this day."

Those last three words I added deliberately, and in English. In the eyes of the other man there was a queer light. Tense, waiting for him to break, I met his level gaze. Right then I knew it is a lie that a man can read another's thoughts through his eyes. If I could have seen beneath his paint, perhaps his features would have settled my raging doubt. But his eyes betrayed less than nothing.

Some time after I finished, the chief pushed his fire-sticks toward the center, motioned to a bed of fresh spruce boughs for me, and lay down on his own bed, wrapped in a wolf-skin rug. I could not hold myself from a last stab, as I spread the blanket.

"Jim Stevenson, Theresa Jodrell is in Nome, unmarried."

That settled it for me. I dozed off to sleep half-amused with my fanciful imagination.

IT MUST have been two weeks later—for we were across the mountains and half-way to the first trading-post—when Paul, one of the Crees, came into my tent one evening. As usual when he was excited, he spoke so quickly in garbled French and Cree that I caught only the general drift.

I gathered that one of our pack-dogs which we secured from the Hare tribe had run off into the woods after feeding-time. Its pack had not been opened since we left the teepee village, until Paul opened it to distribute the load with the other dogs. We assumed it contained caribou jerkie, of which we had bought a good deal from the chief.

"But here, look!" concluded Paul. "Look, *m'sieur!* Look at this!"

I was gazing at a robe, or rather a cape, all of fox-pelts. It was made of snowy-white Arctic skins and was trimmed with choicest black fox; but richest of all were the two beautifully matched silvers which criss-crossed in front. It was a king's ransom, that cape, or a queen's despair. The gorgeousness of it tied my tongue. And I saw, at a second look, that it was made for a woman.

Paul was breaking out again, and thrusting something else under my nose. "But that, it is not all! Look, look here!"

It was a revolver, an old thing speckled with rust, but unmistakable.

"What the ——!" Paul spluttered. "Smoke of smokes, *m'sieur!* I do not understand."

"But I do!" said I, after a pause.